

About this book...

- Does anyone today say, 'I have no sin'?
- When is a sin not a sin?
- Can past sins deeply affect us?
- Is it possible for us to be totally free from our past?
- What is God's purpose in liberating man?

For many Christian centuries believers have been occupied with the principle of confession. The author of this book thinks that confession can be merely a ritual, or—on the principle of penance—can draw people into introversion, presenting God as a grim Accountant. He believes, nevertheless that there is a biblical truth of confession which can bring troubled people to liberation and peace directly from the truth of Christ and his Atonement. True confession can bring people in tension to peace and joy.

Geoffrey Bingham is an Anglican minister. His experience as soldier, prisoner-of-war, farmer, writer, teacher and family man, as well as theologian, has given him grounds for writing material which is Australian in tone, and relevant to the society in which we live. Some have found his books life-changing.

new creation publications inc.
www.newcreation.org.au



*If we say
we have no sin...*

Geoffrey C. Bingham

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Published by

NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
P.O. Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia, 5051
1987

First published by New Creation Publications Inc.,
Australia, 1987

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National Library of Australia card number and
ISBN 0 86408 071 9

IF WE SAY WE HAVE NO SIN...

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just,
and will forgive our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

(I John 1:8–9)

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Cover design by Glenys Murdoch

Wholly set and printed at
New Creation Publications Inc.
Coromandel East, South Australia
www.newcreation.org.au

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FOREWORD

This little book is a companion volume to a number of studies on practical Christian living. The tides of these books can be found in the front of this book. Two small books which link directly with this one are *The Cleansing of the Memories* and *The Question and Comfort of Confession*.

For some time now there has been a change of climate in the modes and substance of preaching and worship. Humanism has always been present in the world, and the church has been confronted by it down through the centuries. Trust in the authority of the inscripturated word has declined—as indeed it has temporarily in other ages. Even Christian man is excited by what he calls ‘scientific truth’ and believes that relief can be brought to man in his present troubles by the practical application of such truth. Others have just become bored regarding biblical truth and do not believe it has anything other than a moralistic application. Yet others look for new thought in preaching, and a freshening in worship. Some believe that worship as entertainment is legitimate and desirable. Perhaps much of all this is a judgement upon former dullness and stodginess in preaching and worship, where that has been the case.

There is also—today—a demand for the Christian Gospel to be a utility. Many desire the church to be utilitarian, and this on the horizontal level. Whilst many believe they are offering worship vertically they may be worshipping worship rather than God, finding new experiments in worship exciting and

satisfying. The utilitarian approach demands that ‘the message be relevant to where we are today, and practical—mostly practical’.

This has often led to a decline in biblical understanding, and a grasping of ‘the eternities, i.e. the great truths of God, of man’s fall, redemption by the Atonement, and the things of eternity. It is almost as though man matters most, and God must attend to man’s need. Indeed a ‘need theology’ has begun to flourish, so that it is not what God requires *of man* that is studied, but what God ought to do for *man*.

It is against this background that this little book—amongst others—has been written. We must get back to expounding and believing the Word of God. By this we do not mean stodgy worship, dull exposition of the Scriptures, and repression of great joy in God’s service: indeed to the contrary. We need to discover the whole truth and so to live in what matters such as redemption, liberation, and renewing salvation, that these may again become central. Renewal of these truths has come time and again to Christ’s church down through the ages, especially through visitations of revival. Whatever insights and principles we may receive through science and education will not supersede the wisdom God has communicated (and communicates) through His Word. It is an illusion that God does not love man and redeem him from his miseries, promoting him to new life, and burnishing His image in man until he, who had become so dulled and tarnished, glows afresh by His grace—grace alone.

God alone knows the depths of a man and his personal problems. He comes to rehabilitate man, not merely for the healing and renewing of him, but to give him back his dignity and freshly make him a partaker in the divine plan for all history. Man has eternal connotation, for he cannot be satisfied

fully by the temporal.

Man has been obsessed by the goal of perfection which has greatly added to his misery when he cannot achieve it of himself. Humanism is scandalized by the claim that man is a creature of the Creator, a son of the Father, and a subject of the King, and can accomplish nothing of lasting value by himself. This small book seeks to deal with one aspect of Christian living, for the same drive for perfection also keeps the believer in tension. When he knows afresh the love of God, and that he does not have to somehow atone for his own failure, he can relax and work towards maturity without having ‘a monkey on his back. The past need be no misery to him. Confession—rightly understood—is a bulwark against fear of failure and dread of failure’s consequences. We should be able to say, ‘I have sin’, and yet live in serenity.

This is what this little book is all about.

*Geoffrey Bingham,
Coromandel, 1987*

A NOTE ON READING THIS BOOK

Some readers find the reading of theology most difficult. As a writer I find myself concerned that readers who are like this should not give up reading such as this present one because of this difficulty. I know as a fact that numerous readers do not find it difficult and are able to follow my arguments quite well—given in that my writing and communication are far from perfect’

One of the reasons I write books on truth the way I do is that is how it is with me! I seek to become simpler in expression and perhaps I still have a long way to go. However, I respect also the minds of those people who wish to profit by reading. If what I write is not detailed enough for them, or if the argument seems to assume what it needs to expound from biblical authority, then a digest treatment is not adequate. Indeed it is a mild form of insult to the sincere reader. That is why I write the way I do.

In order to overcome the problem of reading this book I have set out the substance of the argument in a Review at the end of the book (page 34). If someone who picks up this book does nothing but read the Review then he will gain the essence of the book. What I trust is that by reading it he will be persuaded then to begin at the first chapter and follow through to the end.

CHAPTER ONE**WHO HAS NO SIN?**

Paul's message is, 'All have sinned', and he quotes Old Testament writers to support his argument, saying, 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God' (Rom. 3:10–11; cf. Ps. 14:1–3). Genesis 6:5 reports, 'The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually'. In the same book (8:21) 'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth'. Jeremiah quotes God as saying,

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately corrupt;
who can understand it?
"I the LORD search the mind
and try the heart,
to give to every man according to his ways,
according to the fruit of his doings."
(Jer. 17:9–10)

Many other writers could be called in to give support for the sinfulness of man. One powerful passage is Romans 5:12–21 where the whole human race is shown to be one with

Adam in his sin, as well as the judgement of death which follows. No less Romans 1:18–32 shows that out of human rebellion come fearful moral and spiritual depravity, disintegration of the person and society because man has deprived himself of the life of God.

If this is so then why would anyone say he had no sin? The answers are varied, such as, 'Sin is of itself deceptive'. The verse quoted at the heading of our chapter shows this. The writer of Hebrews (3:13) enjoins his readers to 'exhort one another every day ... that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. In fact the Scriptures show that every form of evil—including fallen man—is deceitful. Another answer is, 'Man is a creature of a conscience which condemns him when he does wrong. He has to deny the conscience, or admit he is a sinner which he is unwilling to do'. Man—in order to justify himself—plays games with his conscience, making out that he is a fine fellow. He can do no wrong, or he rationalizes away the failures he has, blaming them on to others or circumstances and such things.

The Special Non-Sinners

John the apostle—it seems—was speaking to those who understood themselves to be Christians. They had arrived at a position where they considered themselves without sin. Some scholars argue that there were Christians who mixed the Gospel with a form of philosophy called Gnosticism. Gnosticism, roughly speaking, held the view of dualism, i.e. that all that is material is deceptive, and only the unseen is genuine. Thus if the body sins it is not the person who sins

for he is pure: it is only his body which does wrong. Also Gnostics saw knowledge as bringing salvation. So then their acts did not save them, only the knowledge was esoteric or hidden. They had degrees of knowledge and so degrees of salvation.

There may have been other views held by these persons to whom John wrote, such as what today is called 'sinless perfection'. For the most part sinless perfectionists would say that in being crucified with Christ (cf. Gal. 2:20; 5:24; 6:14; Rom. 6:1–14; Col. 3:1–5) they were now actually dead to sin, i.e. in that co-crucifixion with Christ they had had a moral and spiritual death, coming alive (i.e. being raised) to a life of sinlessness. It may have been to such that John was speaking—we do not rightly know.

What we do know is that there were people to whom John wrote who thought they were sinless.

The Dangers of Sinlessness

John said that those who claimed they did not sin were in great danger because (i) they were deceiving themselves, and (ii) the truth—of God—was not in them. David had once cried,

Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

He meant that deceit was foreign to God, and dangerous to man. He himself had just gone through a terrible experience of self-deceit. Because of the rebuke of Nathan the prophet he realized how he lacked wisdom.

Doubtless many elements of Gnosticism are with us today,

as also other self-justifying endeavours such as modern Pharisaism and moral relativism, but sinless perfectionists—as such—are very few. Christians for the most part admit they are sinners, and even following their conversion still sin, though the old thrust to sin is not present in the way it formerly was.

How Then Does The Warning Against Sinlessness Apply Today?

Simply put, it applies in this way: if *we do not call any sin we commit a sin, then we are involved in self-deceit*. This principle should be easily understood by us all for often when accused of sin—either of commission or omission—we defend ourselves saying it was not sin. We may admit to it being a deed done in weakness, or we may blame it onto Satan or other enemies, but we maintain we were not sinning. We may even go so far as to admit it was an imperfection but we deny it was sin—blatant sin. We may see ourselves as the victims of many conditioning factors such as circumstances, environment, society generally, the times in which we live, and even resort to blaming the parental upbringing we had, and even the sinfulness of our parents, our parents' parents, and so on. A regular factor we blame is heredity.

When we blame such factors we are really saying we are just 'chips on the ocean', tossed up and down with the prevailing winds and currents. By talking this way we admit we have no personal moral strength, that we cannot make effective decisions because of the factors that oppose us. This takes away from us true dignity. The Stoics saw that and had contempt for humans who did not press on with their

decisions. Henley the Stoic poet once wrote:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud,
Beneath the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloodied but unbowed,

Such Stoicism has something to be said for it, as against the whimpering complaints against those—so-called—hostile elements which *cause us to sin against* our wills! In blaming them we disclaim responsibility for our sin. In that sense we say we have no sin. After all, this is just the practice of the heart which is 'deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt'. It is one form of rationalizing away that for which we are wholly responsible.

The apostle John pointed to two dangerous results of claiming to be sinless, (i) self-deceit, and (ii) not having the truth in oneself. The first we have looked at, i.e. we rationalize away our responsibility as moral creatures, and so become enemies of our consciences. The second is not apart from the first, for it is saying we become liars! That is we have no truth within us.

We cannot here go into the whole principle and practice of truth, but it is inescapable that what we really believe forms the basis and motivation for our life-style. *If* we have the truth then we walk in light and do deeds and acts which are the light. *If* we do not walk in the truth then our acts will be those of darkness. Truth is not simply the aggregate (for us) of the facts we have gathered, but it *is God in all His being, in His wisdom, and His actions* For us it is 'truth in the inward

being', and 'wisdom in the secret heart', or as the writer of Proverbs (4:23) put it, 'the issues of life'.

The Deadliness of The Danger

Danger to the Conscience

No man dare play with his conscience. The Bible speaks of, an evil conscience', 'a seared conscience', 'a weak conscience', a 'defiled conscience', and a conscience requiring purging from dead works. It also speaks of 'a pure conscience' and 'a good conscience'. Doubtless the mores of a society develop what we might call a cultural or a religious conscience, and whilst such a conscience can be rehabilitated by the truth of the Gospel, it is still dangerous to go against one's conscience—whatever.

In Isaiah 5:20 the prophet calls down woe upon 'those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter', In Matthew 6:22–23 we come closest to the principle of conscience as taught by Jesus,

'The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!'

In these two quotations the principle is the same, namely that by playing with the conscience, seeking to teach it reversed values, and by self-justification making good evil and evil good, one can end up thinking his evil good and his good evil. Since this does not comport with truth, the lethal end of a man lies in self-deception and total misunderstanding and abuse of the truth.

CHAPTER TWO

LIBERTY OR NOT LIBERTY?

We now come to the heart of the matter. If a person says he (or she) is not sinful, then *that person will never know God's forgiveness*. Because guilt is innate to the human race—to all people—then a lifetime of guilt will accrue, and since guilt is something with which no person can deal—by nature of the case—apart from the love of God in the work of Christ by revelation of the Holy Spirit, then the unforgiven, unjustified person must forever exist with the guilt of sin. To one who has come to know forgiveness and justification this is a terrifying thought.

Jesus said, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'. He added, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin... So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:34, 36). In order to have this freedom from sin one must believe Christ's word is the word of truth, must know the truth as Christ, and thus by Christ be set free from the guilt of sin. If one refuses the way of Christ—i.e. his incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension—then sin will be indelibly imprinted forever on the

unrepentant sinner, and written on the inward part, whilst the secret heart will contain only falsehood, foolishness and guilt.

The Nature of God's Wrath and Human Guilt

The reader should study in detail the passage of Romans 1: 18–32. Here it is said that God's wrath is constantly revealed against 'all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth'. In the light of what we have seen above wicked men are those who refuse the truth of God, and so the action of truth, and make for themselves a false truth—to coin a contradictory phrase. This sin and wickedness has attendant guilt, and guilt is composed of many things such as guilt feelings, fear, a sense of alienation, confusion, heaviness, impurity, defilement, along with rebellion, rebellious acts, stubbornness, bitterness, hatred, and many other such things. We mean that the guilt of sin is composed of these elements, and they compound themselves for the wrath of God consists in God giving man up to all these dynamic elements until man has a reprobate or base mind in which true moral sense and values are lost. God deliberately and personally gives man up to these things. This is His wrath; and in it is nothing vindictive whatever, but only God's implacable hatred of evil and His deliberate persistence in destroying that which is evil.

God's Incredible Forgiveness And Justification

In this small book we cannot cover everything regarding the

action and nature of the Atonement. Simply we can say that God showed His love in sending His Son to die as a propitiation for our sins, which means that far from the guilt—wrath descending upon us, it descended upon His Son who—for his part—loved us and gladly bore our guilt of sin to exhaustion and extinction in his own body, mind, conscience and spirit until it was erased forever. This remarkable act—so excruciating to the Father and the Son (if not the Holy Spirit) —opened up the way for genuine forgiveness and justification. Forgiveness could only happen on the basis of the work of the Cross, and justification from the judgement of the law could be valid for man only because Christ bore the penalty of that law.

Of course man must have a revelation of this to his whole being, thus being drawn into the acts of repentance and faith, so receiving the fruits of the Cross, i.e. forgiveness and justification.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONFESSION OF SIN

We should now look back to the verses which we quoted under the first heading of our book (chapter one), particularly verse 9,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just,
and will forgive our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This is a most interesting verse. The clause, 'If we confess our sins' must mean that the receptive reader is primarily confessing the fact that he does sin, or has sinned, and that now there is no deceit in his heart about this matter, for the truth has come to him. Let us dwell for a moment on *the principle of confession*.

In the New Testament the verb 'to confess' (Greek: *homologeō* and *exhomologeō*) is used of confessing sins only five times. Two of these instances are used (once each of the same occasion) in Matthew and Mark of the people confessing their sins in the Jordan at the baptism given by John. The third instance is in Acts 19:18, 'Many also of those who were

now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices' The fourth instance is in James 5:16 where the elders (and possibly the sick person) confess mutually their sins or faults. The fifth use is in our present verse. There are nineteen other uses of the verb which have mainly to do with confessing (or acknowledging) such—and—such to be so—and—so. In fact the verb 'to confess' really means—in essence—'to acknowledge'. Thus Christ confesses us to, and before the Father (Matt. 10:32) Christ is confessed as Lord (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11), the saints that they are 'strangers and exiles on the earth' (Heb. 11: 13) and so on.

A Problem of Interpretation of I John 1:9

There are many ways of looking at the clause 'If we confess our sins'. One is that if we come to see we are sinners, then we confess this fact. In a sense this is a once-for-all (i.e. not to be repeated) initial and principal act. Another interpretation develops a continuing principle and a practice, so that when one commits a sin one confesses it to God, and so it is forgiven. The third interpretation requires us to look at the preceding verse so that out of the two verses we get something like the following: 'If we are people who (wrongly) say we have no sin, if we—these very ones who deceive ourselves and so do not have the truth in us—confess that we are sinners and do sin, then God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

What, Then, Is Confession?

Which of the three versions (above) must we choose? Confession of sins and sinfulness is nowhere put down as an essential step to salvation in the apostolic message either in the Acts or the Epistles. Repenting, believing and converting are all mentioned but not confession. Continuing confession of sin is likewise mentioned in no other New Testament scripture. Whilst in James 5:16 there is mutual confession of sins when the elders meet to heal a person who has called them for this exercise, it is certainly not confession to God. It is commanded, 'confess your sins [faults] to one another'. In Acts 19:18 it is believers who confess their occult practices, and such confession is public, although the confession may have been primarily to God.

It would seem then that John is saying to the heretics, i.e. those who say they have no sin, *'Look, if you who say you have no sin come to the point of acknowledging that you do have sin, and do habitually sin, then in spite of your self-deception and not having the truth in you God will be faithful and just and forgive your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness'*.

The final interpretation may disturb some readers, especially if they have developed a practice of continuing confession with a view to having continuing forgiveness from God. This practice has long been in the churches which we might call 'Catholic' and 'Evangelical'.

In the Catholic tradition the ordinance or sacrament of Penance is an ancient custom. It has three elements, namely contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The practice began in the times of the early persecution of the church. We will not here enter into its origins. Suffice to say that *contrition* was

demanding as sorrow for sins, *confession* was the divulging of the sin (or, sins) to 'confessors' who in sub-apostolic days were men who remained faithful under persecution and who were supposed to have some merit which would aid the sinner before God and the church. *Satisfaction* was the action the sinner took to show—i.e. prove—his sincerity in confessing his sin. The mode of *satisfaction* was generally prescribed by the one who heard his confession.

In the Evangelical tradition there is the equivalent, often, of the principle of penance, for the penitent is expected to have sorrow (contrition) for his sin, and to confess it. Whilst he knows he cannot give satisfaction he tends to think that somehow his contrition is proof itself of penitence, and this then becomes a form of satisfaction. This is home out by the feeling, often, by the penitent that he has not felt sorry enough for his sins. Also he sometimes feels it is indecent to accept forgiveness immediately. He must suffer more!

What Is The Valid Mode Of Confession?

Is it possible that Catholic Penance and Evangelical Penance (i.e. Continuing Confession)—whilst being practically useful to some degree—are both not wholly biblical? In order to get to some practical solution let us consider the following:

- (i) Since this injunction to confess sins is found only in I John 1:8–9 and not *explicitly* anywhere else in the apostolic passages, should the practices of Penance and Continuing Confession be based on this one passage?
- (ii) Since the New Testament (apostolic) Gospel appears to

grant total forgiveness of all sins, does there—so to speak — have to be a granting of forgiveness ‘by instalments’? For ‘the forgiveness of sins’ and ‘justification by grace’ see Matthew 26:28; John 1:29; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:30–32; 10:43; 13:38–39; 22:24; 26:18; Romans 3:24; 4:7–8; 8:1–2; 11 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians IA; 3:13; Ephesians 1:7; 4:32; Colossians 1:13–14; 3:13. Whilst these are but a portion of direct reference to forgiveness we must ask ourselves whether this forgiveness is not total and once—for—all. It appears that it is once—for—all since ‘He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree’ (I Pet. 2:24). The writer of Hebrews says, ‘But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified’ (10:12, 14).

(iii) If the gift of forgiveness covers all our sins—past, present and future—because he (Christ) has borne, defeated and cleansed them all—why should any form of penance or continuing confession be required? Certainly Penance as such is not at all indicated in the Gospel. It may well be argued that a sin is a sin and we should acknowledge it, but if confession is made the condition of forgiveness then where is grace? When we acknowledge our sin is it not a confession that it has been forgiven, and that God is the great Forgiver? In other words we do not confess (continually) in order to be forgiven, but because God has already forgiven then such acknowledgement of our sins, whenever it occurs (confession: *homologeo*), is a confession of God’s grace and our need of that forgiving grace. Doubtless God has already forgiven but we dare not presume on His grace. However we must *assume* His grace of forgiveness, or we will come back into the despair of guilt and seek to use the time—old means of offering Him the sacrifices of self—justifying acts!

Some Difficulties Regarding Confession

It has been observed that if there is forgiveness only where and when we confess **then what of the** sins of which we are unconscious? We could say that since we are unconscious of these then God knows the intention of our hearts, and the disposition of our minds and takes that for acknowledgement in a general way. Perhaps one day or any day a sin will emerge to our consciousness and He will then forgive it upon our confessing it.

If God has forgiven sins which are unconscious then why cannot we say that all sins can be forgiven this way so that acknowledgement at any time is not an act of obtaining forgiveness, but to assure us of the forgiveness already given? The knowledge that we may have a vast number of sins yet unconfessed must imbue the mind with anxiety, and be confusing to the conscience. In all this confusion what happens in regard to human guilt?

CHAPTER FOUR

LIBERATING CONFESSION (1)

Forgiveness De Jure and De Facto

To this point it is clear that I believe God forgives us all our sins at the point of our conversion, i.e. new birth. These sins may be called ‘past, present and future’. Of course—at any point in our lives—there can only be *past* sin, for the act of (so-called) *future* sin has not yet happened. Yet from another vantage point we see that sins will yet happen. Because we are creatures of time, in time, we look back and see all our sins—whether of the past or future—laid upon the person of Jesus at the time of the Crucifixion. With our time sense we say they have been finished forever, and in saying that we are correct.

Whilst I believe that all sins are forgiven when we repent and have faith (see above the references under the heading ‘What is the Valid Mode of Confession?’) yet I do not believe any sin is forgiven *de facto* where a person says he does not sin or have sin. If the person is a Christian and holds the heresy of his sinlessness then we may say he has been forgiven *de jure* but is not getting the good of this forgiveness

de facto. If the person is not a Christian then he remains unforgiven on every score.

Initial Saving Confession

If what I have said above is correct, i.e. that no act of confession—as such—is called for as a step to salvation then what I agree is that in fact repentance and faith constitute *a virtual act of confession*. In other words by repenting the sinner has *acknowledged* (confessed) he does have sin. This being so he is now a totally forgiven person and is free from sin’s condemnation, i.e. ‘...the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me [him] free from the law of sin and death’ (Rom. 8:2). Because of this definitive act which has taken place—once—for—all—the sinner is set free forever. Whilst he must never *presume* upon this wonderful act of God’s grace he must always *assume* it and live ‘in fear and trembling’. He ought not to lose his sense of awe, wonder and gratitude, and therefore must walk in the Spirit, in love and in the light (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:16, 18; Eph. 5:2, 8). His freedom will keep him bound to God and His law.

Confession

A Continually Liberating Thing

We come now to what I trust is the heart of this book—indeed to the truth which keeps us continually liberated. It would appear that having said confession does not obtain forgiveness for us I have gone back on this by first saying that initial confession is not called for as a step to (or in) salvation.

It would also appear contradictory –for me to say that both Catholic Penance and Evangelical Penance (Continual Confession) are not wholly biblical and then to say confession is a continually liberating thing. Let me explain.

CHAPTER FIVE

LIBERATING CONFESSION (II)

Initial Confession

If there is something we may call ‘initial confession’ which is inherent in repentance and faith, then it is not nitpicking to say that it is not a required objective step in salvation. There may well be a reason why it is not outwardly required of those called to conversion (cf. Acts 3:19 and 26:18, 20 where people must *convert* rather than *be converted*), and that reason may be that confession of all one’s sin would be impossible—by nature of the case. However that may be, it is certainly clear that at conversion—via repentance and faith—one *confesses one is a sinner!* That confession is an acknowledgement which liberates one from any illusion or delusion that he had been without sin. Such an acknowledgement should be liberating for his entire lifetime. In one sense he would be set for life because of it, and his assurance of salvation would always relate to it.

Continuing Confession: The Knowledge of Sin

What then of ‘continuing confession’? This is so important that we must tackle it in various ways. The first is via the question that when the sinner converted did he really believe he was that kind of sinner which the Scriptures said he was? For understanding this we should read again the opening paragraph of our book, i.e. ‘Who Has No Sin?’. This is a most important point, for relatively few persons *seem* to come under a radical conviction of their own sinfulness, and of the holiness of the law, hence a true conviction of sin itself.

In Romans 3:20 Paul says, ‘...through the law comes the knowledge of sin. It is a curious fact that by nature of the case we cannot know the true nature of sin. This is because we are sinners, guilty people who, having lost innocence, cannot be detached and objective enough to view the matter of sin. Christ, who never did sin, knew (knows) more concerning sin than any other man. Even so Paul tells us that through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

In this he could be saying one of two things, or the both of them together. The first is a simple one: when God states His law then we can check out the way we live and see whether or not we are keeping that law. This can rightly be called a knowledge of sin. But then, do we really know the essence of the nature of sin? Again this would be difficult because sin is not ontological, i.e. it has no essential being, seeing it was never created by God. To our human thinking it has, indeed, a very real being! We see it as most dynamic! Even so it has no *substantial being*, and its dynamics—so called—are perverse and negative. Yet—fairly enough—we can assess by the law whether a thing is sin or not.

The *second* element of receiving the *knowledge* of sin through the law is as follows: when we sin we have conflict with the law. Paul shows this brilliantly in Romans 7:7–13 where he says we have experience of sin, and experience of the law, and the two constitute an experiential nature of law and sin, for we *experience* them both. The law forbids a certain action or prescribes a certain action and we rebel. Sin uses the law like a fulcrum in order to lever us. The law allows this, for when sin becomes compounded we see the, sinfulness of sin. Thus the law brings two actions, (i) the dreadful internal experience of sin, its horrific guilt, and it—, bondage, and, (ii) the revelation of the nature of sin in its cruelty, deceitfulness, and its ‘exceeding sinfulness’.

So then the law brings some *knowledge* of sin. The question which we must ask is, ‘Is the *knowledge* of sin the same as the *conviction* of sin?’. This is an important question, and we must answer it.

Continuing Confession:

On the night of his betrayal Jesus said to his disciples, ‘And when he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convince the world concerning sin ... because they do not believe in me’ (John 16:8–9). The word *convince* means also *convict* and *rebuke*. Jesus is saying that it requires the ministry of the Holy Spirit to bring the nature of sin to the world and to convict and rebuke them of their own sins and sinfulness. It could be said that the Spirit alone could bring a revelation of what sin is, and is doing. This is illustrated in John 15:18–26 where Jesus had said that the world would hate the disciples because it had

hated him, even without knowing him: hence only the Spirit could give them a revelation of the truth.

A good question in respect to the knowledge and the conviction of sin is, 'Is it possible to have a knowledge of sin without having the conviction of sin?' A second question to consider is, 'Does conviction of sin mean that one—being so convicted—will necessarily go on to conversion?' I would think there can be a difference between having the knowledge of sin and the conviction of sin, even though the two ought to go together. Likewise I am sure than one can be convicted of sin in one way, and not move towards conversion. Peter had a conviction of sin which led to his repentance (cf. John 21:15–19), and Judas had a conviction of sin which led to remorse and death (Matt. 27:3–5). Likewise David had sinned and repented (Psalms 32 and 51), whilst Saul, having been convicted in some manner (I Sam. ch. 15), ended his own life in battle. It may be in regard to this that Paul wrote, 'For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death' (II Cor. 7: 10). Whatever the case, a person needs both the knowledge of sin and the conviction of sin before he (she) can offer genuine confession.

Continuing Confession True and Effective Confession

There is an interesting and important passage in Ezekiel chapter 36. In verses 16 to 23 God tells Israel why He punished them in exile. He then promises what we have come to know as national and personal regeneration. Verses 24 to 28 speak of being cleansed from sin, given a new heart in place of the old,

and of receiving a new spirit by the Spirit of God. Having spoken of this marvelous restoration God says, 'Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds which were not good; and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds'. This, then, is speaking about a post–regeneration knowledge, conviction and loathing of sin.

I often receive remarkable insights when counseling people. When folk come to conversion they generally are melted by the love and forgiveness of God, and generally and immediately forgive others. This brings a great sense of relief and release to both forgiver and forgiven. Yet often there comes a recession in the matter of forgiving others. Indeed some appear to go back on their own word of forgiveness, that they become unforgiving. Why is this?

I am sure there are many elements in this puzzling condition of a person. The root of it is that we revert to thinking we were not so bad after all, not even prior to conversion. The old self–justifying technique again comes into operation. If we were not bad, then those who sinned against us were really wrong. Anger and disgust of others—with resentment—swings back into action. The warnings about not forgiving others (cf. Matt. 18:21ff.) are forgotten. The recession now gains impetus in movement and growth. For all intents and purposes our confession of sinfulness has been cancelled! In 11 Peter 1:9 we are told of a barren believer who has deliberately forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Forgetting he was purged had become essential to his, spiritual barrenness. He had to forget or he would have been bound to be under love's obligation to obedience, and the forgiving of others (cf. Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).

Another delusive element is that we forgive others when we—in fact—are the ones who need forgiveness. Some children

generously (sic!) forgive their parents for all that they—the Parents—have done. What they do not realize is that much of what they have felt to be their parents' failure and sin is indeed their own emotional reaction and anger against the parents: likewise parents who have been reacting against their children. Both have magnified the sins of the others and minimized their own sin and culpability. This is what we all do to others. In these cases we need a new or renewed conviction of our own sins. Whilst we enlarge the sins of others and reduce our own we fail to receive the full grace of God (see 11 Cor. 6:1–2). In other words if we will not to recognize, i.e. acknowledge, our sins, then we *have phased ourselves out of the area of God's forgiveness*. It is not that He has not forgiven us, but that we have decided there is no need of forgiveness, since—ostensibly—we did not do these things!

It is regarding this principle that our book has been written, and it would be a pity to pass over it, failing to underline its importance. We repeat then, 'Whatever is sin must be seen as sin and acknowledged as sin otherwise what we refuse to call sin will not be an object of forgiveness. Doubtless God will have forgiven us *de jure*, but we will fail to get the good of it *de facto*'. Whilst there will be no objective guilt present, we will somehow think or feel it is, even though we have denied guilt can be there since others have sinned and we have not in these particular cases. Therefore, whatever a person refuses to acknowledge is as though it were still present, in which case we may talk of unconfessed sin which virtually—though not actually—leaves us with the guilt of it, and all the dynamics that attend guilt. The sad thing about it is that we cannot get to the causes or resolve the uneasiness that attends guilt.

Sadly enough we give an opportunity to Satan, evil powers, ourselves and others to accuse us. Accusation is a

fearful thing. It brings anxiety. The phantom guilt we have brings us back into our old existential guilt concerning ourselves, i.e. that we are deficient, have not lived life truly in conformity with God's laws—and so on! We then chase around trying to justify ourselves. In this state of mind we go through the old syndrome of seeking for hidden sin, trying to exorcize ourselves of something in the past which seems to be causing the trouble, so that we tread the old relentless round of self-examination. We may feel compelled to seek the aid of therapists, who—if they do not understand the principles of conviction of sin, acknowledgement of those sins and the grace of forgiveness—will not be able to resolve the matter.

It may appear from what we have said above that the attributing of sin to others is our primary failure, but equally so is our refusal to accept that we, ourselves, go on sinning all the time. Doubtless this will not be with the same bias, disposition, intensity or measure that we sinned prior to regeneration. John in his Epistles leaches strongly that the person born of God does not commit sin (I John 3:9; 5:18). He does not mean it is impossible to do so, for he acknowledges that at times we do sin (I John 2:2). Rather he is speaking in the sense that Joseph spoke in regard to proposed adultery with Potiphar's wife, '...how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?' (Gen. 39:6ff.). As it has been said many times, 'Whilst it is not impossible to sin, it is possible not to sin', and that being the case we must allow for the possibility of sinning, and of that sin going unacknowledged by us.

What a relief then to realize, when we are reminded of some sin, or we recognize—perhaps with shock and horror—that what we thought was not sin, was in fact, sin! The moment we see it as sin, and so acknowledge it, then that is the

moment of realizing God's forgiveness of it. It means we can look back over the whole range of our lives and be unmoved guiltily by what we have done. Indeed it is a very healthy exercise to do so. We do not have to box up our past and hide it away from ourselves, as from others. We can look at the whole hosts of sins and failures, and know they have been obliterated by grace. Doubtless during this process we will remember our evil ways, and our deeds that were not good; and loathe ourselves for our iniquities and our abominable deeds, but this will be a healthy exercise provided we do not seek to expiate those sins by some self-justifying acts, i.e. by 'concocted deeds of obedience' which, anyway, only serve to increase our guilt-anxiety.

We may then sum up this section by saying that since God has forgiven and justified us then the way is made open to see our past and our present with great honesty, and without being worried by some mysterious elements being hidden away in our depths, for which we must ever seek, bring to light, and deal with-by various methods. No, we must see that our past, our present, and our future have been taken care of by the Atonement, and only by the Atonement. There is no other basis or medium by which we can be at peace, for this is the dynamic of the Gospel of grace. Not only our sins of commission, and of omission have been dealt with, but also our griefs, our sorrows and our wounds. Our sins which were crimson and glaring have been made white as the driven snow. Nothing can confront us to hurt us.

We are free then to be confronted by our weaknesses, foibles, failures and idiosyncrasies as well as our dreadful sins and crimes knowing that the acknowledgement of these things which are already forgiven will help us to live as persons freed from our pasts. Of course there are other things we must now

examine, but the principle of acknowledgement is liberating. It does not become a finicky, detailed and nitpicking operation with a Deity who is our Accountant, but with God who is our Father and with whom *we have no account whatever*. This is a joyful and serene way of living, even though it be continually contested by powers hostile to us, or jealous of the full salvation which is ours.

CHAPTER SIX

LIBERATING CONFESSION (III)

Continuing Confession: A Present Problem With The Past

All that we have said above has immense practical importance. To be free of our past means freedom in the present. Not being under the guilt or domination of sin (Rom. 6:10–14) we are now free to live. Being free to live our life is not just constantly guarding ourselves against the past, for the Gospel has done that and the Spirit has communicated the truth and scaled it for us (Rom. 8:2; 11 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5: 1). To be free of the past is to be free in the present, and free through, by, and for the future. In other words, by grace we have been liberated into true humanity, and so into proper human living.

Without modifying this last statement we have to say that the era in which we live is ‘this present evil age’ (*aeon*). Being members of ‘the age to come’, we must yet live in the tension of the two ages: hence the battles we have. When we come to live in the ‘new age’ we will live by sight (11 Cor. 5:7 and context). Meanwhile we live by faith and the Spirit (e.g. Gal. 5:5). We also live by hope (I Pet. 1:3f.; Rom. 5:5; Eph. 1– 17–19). By this we mean that all the work of the Atonement

which has dealt conclusively with the past is known to faith, by faith, and must continuously be appropriated by faith. All is ‘safe’ when faith, hope, and love are operative, i.e. the believer lives in Christ with Christ indwelling him (Gal. 2:20), being in the Father (I Thess. 1: 1; 11 Thess. 1: 1; 1 John 4:16) and living and walking in the Spirit (Rom. 8:9–11, 14–17; Gal. 5:16, 18, 25). This last verse tells us we live life in dependence upon God which is in fact the life of faith. We repeat that in this faith–living the matters of the past, present and future do not worry us.

It is essential then that we all learn to walk by faith. The trouble is that often we do not live by faith. We revert to walking by sight, and since we cannot see the things of faith by sight, we can be in trouble. It is a bit like a Cinderella show at midnight—everything of substance crumbles away and is no more. This is the time when ‘sight’ sees no conclusive work of the Spirit. All our past sins are back again to trouble us. We revert to non–admission of certain sins and guilt. We take back—so to speak—the old dread and fear of the past. We thus have anxiety in the present which relates to the future, i.e. we do not have the hope of love (Rom. 5:5).

This is when we often feel disillusioned with the Gospel. We seek out ‘sight’ therapies for our past. We set about trying to dig what is in our subterranean labyrinths. We compulsively open cupboard doors in order to disinter old skeletons. In this way we expose ourselves to the powerful forces of darkness. These had lost their grip over us, but now they renew it. God’s love seemed to have evaporated. We become fearful and irritated. Every detail of life seem against us. The demands of love are beyond our fulfillment. We wonder whether we are the same persons. Everything becomes a matter of stress. We even doubt our salvation, and imagine God is

against us. This may be what some call ‘the dark night of the soul’. Certainly darkness surrounds us.

Yet none of this has to happen, and certainly this state does not have to be permanent. Paul says, ‘No temptation [testing] has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it’ (I Cor. 10: 13).

Nothing has changed in the truth. The Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1: 16–17). The word of the Cross is the power of God to us who are being Saved (I Cor. 1:18). God has promised and He will do it right up unto the day of Jesus Christ (I Thess. 5:23–24; Phil. 1:6; 2:12–13). We can be sure—however much we may lack assurance!—that ‘[nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:38–39).

Continuing Confession: The Battle of Faith

We have only one battle—the battle of faith. When the Jews asked Jesus, ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’, he told them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’ (John 6:28, 29). Believing is not merely intellectual assent. It is hearing God and believing Him, through His word. It is believing in the Son and all his redeeming work. It is obeying that word of the Gospel, repenting and converting, being regenerated, justified and sanctified. It is entrusting oneself to the Son and coming **into** union with him. It is the whole of one’s life at one with the Son. This is faith.

When we withdraw faith to any degree it means the gifts of God seem to become unreal, and as we have seen above, the ‘old’ virtually returns, but it returns *de facto* and not *de jure*. We must refuse the elements of ‘unfaith’, and be renewed in faith. Every day—indeed every moment—propaganda keeps issuing from the headquarters of evil, and we are told to be renewed in the spirit of our mind, i.e. to believe only what God has spoken to us in His word. In this way we are renewed in faith, and know there is no need for ‘the dark night of the soul’. The apostles had no such thing, and we ought not to invent it as a pattern for believers.

When we go to people and begin to search for something in our past then we will know we are being unbiblical and untruthful. We ought to think again of confession, that is we ought to face up to all our life and confess that Christ ‘is Lord’, that he has dealt with every sin and defeated death, and—looking down the years we have lived—know that God has pronounced us righteous, and that Christ not only was the propitiation for our sins (Rom. 3:24–25; 1 John 4: 10) but that he is that now when we sin (I John 2:2) and that ever lives to make intercession for us against every accusation, every evil power, so that we here on earth may fight the good fight of faith with a pure and good conscience.

As we fight this battle and know we are forgiven, we will forgive. Knowing love we will love one another. Knowing His promises we will grow strong in hope, and together look forward to ‘great grace’s greater grace’ at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

'If We Say We Have No Sin...'

We do not close our study by seeking to imply that sin—past, present, and future—is a light thing, or that it is a Christian heresy to go to God in confession. The saints down through the ages have wept out their confessions to God from heavy and shocked hearts. Were they not permitted to weep and express their deep contrition then they would be unable to proceed in life. The privilege of this kind of confession is what allows them—as us—to express sorrow and shame and come to peace and joy. This, however, is not a *legal* confession. It is not confession that is a ritual or a routine, or a form of penance. It is not a 'guilt-stopper' or some subtle self-expiation. It is a fleeing to the grace of God who is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the (impenitent] guilty' (Exod. 34:6–7).

No better conclusion to our study can be then than I John 1:9, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, *and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*'. This means total forgiveness and total cleansing from all sin's guilt and pollution. Verse 7 says, 'if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the

blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin'. The latter part of this verse can be translated, 'goes on cleansing us from all sin', meaning that the work of the Cross is always working powerfully in us, keeping us pure and free from sin and its guilt. Likewise I John 2:1–2 carries the same message, 'if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins'. That is, the propitiation is moment by moment constantly effective.

Fortified by this reality we can go on living in faith, subjecting ourselves to none but Him and His Son who is made unto us in wisdom, 'our righteousness, sanctification and redemption'.

REVIEW

THE SUBSTANCE AND ESSENCE OF THE BOOK

Key Passage: I John 1:5–10

The problem which confronts man is his past. He can either ignore it—if that were possible—or accept the fact that it will always confront him, and perhaps at times we can least afford such confrontation. How we meet the present and have hope for the future is linked with how we relate to the past.

The way out for some is to say they have no sin. John says this means self-deception (a dangerous thing) and living outside the truth (a lethal thing). Yet one thinks one is in the truth.

The problem is that man cannot live with guilt and moral pollution. The conscience never lets us rest in such a state. Some seek to use confession to ‘get off the hook’ of conscience. Some subject themselves to legalism, i.e. trying to justify themselves by certain ‘good acts’, but find their guilt increases and the past even more condemns. Some get into states of mental paralysis, and see no way out. They become candidates for all kinds of therapy treatment.

Confession (which this book treats thoroughly) can be viewed either as penance, or a wearying repetitive process by which we are always ‘keeping accounts with God’ who thus appears as The Great Accountant. Confession is nowhere called for as a step towards salvation. There is, however a confession

which is helpful, as we shall see.

By Christ’s life, death, resurrection and ascension, God has done something which sets us free forever from our past, so that we can live in the present with hope for the future. This is the act of Atonement by which sin’s guilt, penalty, power and pollution are finished. Hence when we look back to the past we find all things have been changed because Christ suffered them on the Cross. He bore them to extinction.

The secret (the heart of this book) is that since all condemnation and guilt has been finished, we can look at all our sins—as also our griefs, angers, hurts, and wounds—calmly, knowing they have been finished. In our lifetime—whether pre-conversion or post-conversion living—we have done numberless things which we have never acknowledged as sin or wrong. *We are now free to acknowledge them.* Whilst this may show us to be weak and sinful it does not matter. *There is nothing that has been unacknowledged.* Therefore nothing from the past can have power over us. We are now free to live life as a liberated person can live it.

What we have to keep in mind is that we live this life by *faith*. We do not live it *by sight*. If we slip out from walking by faith, then we are living as though nothing of the Atonement had ever happened, so that we feel we are back where we were. Hence all our sins seem to be alive again; the past condemns us, we are uneasy in the present, and hope for God’s future for us goes limp. Again we are hopeless, and we set about trying to remedy this by the things of sight, which are really no things.

Faith is not something we create by straining at it. It is believing God’s word and believing Christ, trusting him, obeying him, and being in total union with him, personally. Whatever has caused us to slip out of faith may not be made

known, nor should we even seek to discover what it was. We must come back to the Atonement and steadfastly believe it afresh, love Christ and be in union with him. Then faith will come alive again, and we will not be held by the past. So we will be free in the present. Whatever we acknowledge (confess) does not get us forgiveness. Forgiveness has already happened—once for all—and we now get the goodness of that forgiveness. *We do not confess in order to be forgiven, but because we have been forgiven.*

This then is the way of being freed from the past, enriched in the present, and powerfully hopeful of a wonderful future. Now we can go out and live.

Whilst it is not easy to acknowledge what we have been and now are with our weaknesses, our sinning, our idiosyncrasies, and our failures, yet the acknowledgement of these brings great relief and release. We do not have to dig up the past and neutralize it, we do not have to do all kinds of works and programmes to justify ourselves or be accepted by God. God's liberation through the Cross is all we need. That Cross continually works in our lives. His indwelling resurrection life and power take us on to true living, and growing maturity.

Thus to confess we have sin is to be finished with it, not because of our confession, but because of God's great work in Christ. If we refuse acknowledgement of what we have done, and do, then we cannot have the comfort of confession, and the stability of a life changed by God's love, and kept by His continual grace.

Note: The order of this Review does not tally neatly with the order of the book. There are so many insights which support the theme of the Review that it would now be good to read the book itself.